

March 22, 2001

## Angola levee upgrade moves toward final phase

In his song "Louisiana" singer/song writer Randy Newman recalls the flood of 1927 and the resulting "six feet of water in the streets of Evangeline." Had events worked out a bit differently in 1997, Mr. Newman could have written another ballad, this one recounting 15 feet of water on the grounds of LSP (Louisiana State Penitentiary).

Because the 18,000-acre prison (known popularly by its place name, "Angola") is surrounded on three sides by the Mississippi River, it has repeatedly faced serious threat of flooding. After decades of rising and falling flood waters—some that entered prison grounds and some that didn't—responses of those outside the agency seemed to fit a pattern: while waters were threateningly high, there were calls to "do something"—improve the levees, correct the situation; once the muddy waters returned to normal levels inside the banks, calls faded and attention turned to other pressing matters.

The response of Governor M. J. "Mike " Foster, Jr., to the record-high flood waters that threatened Angola in 1997 permanently changed the pattern. As waters rolled over the outer ring levee, flooding 2000 acres and bringing the full force of the river to the main levee structure, and sand boils (water forcing through a layer of sandy soil underneath the levee to "boil up" on the dry side) grew in size and number, Governor Foster announced that he would seek federal assistance. And he did, placing the weight of his office behind his commitment to solve recurring problems associated with Angola's substandard levees, the only ones along the Mississippi River system that were not engineered and monitored by the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers.

As a direct result of that determination, the last of four contracts will be awarded this April to complete the process of bringing Angola's levee system up to the standards of the Mississippi River and Tributaries Project. The Corp-directed upgrade project started formally on July 30, 1999, when the Department of Public Safety and Corrections and the Department of the [U.S.] Army signed a project cooperation agreement. According to its terms, the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers would raise and strengthen 12.1 miles of existing levees along the Mississippi River at Angola, improve an existing internal drainage system, provide seepage berms and relief wells, and carry out appropriate mitigation and all-weather surfacing of the levee crown. Total cost of the four-phase project would be \$26 million, with the state handling 25 percent (\$6.5 million) of the total.

Even before the flooding crisis ended in 1997, the Governor's resolve was apparent. The state let two emergency contracts—one to construct a large berm to help stabilize the levee and stop sand boils and seepage and another to correct two major gaps in the prison's ring levee, part of which also serves as an access road between prison grounds and a ferry landing for employees who cross the river to work.

Cooperation between state and federal authorities resulted in Angola's being named a site for the National Guard's annual training exercises in 1997, 1998, and 1999. In 1997, Guard units, working in two-week stints, supported flood relief efforts by constructing 4000 feet of berm in a critical seepage area along the levee. For the

next two summers, units returned to continue levee improvements, using engineering plans developed by the Corp of Engineers.

In 1997 flood waters at Angola crested at a record 61.3 feet on March 28. Days earlier about 3000 inmates had been moved in the dead of night from their housing units to staging areas on higher ground for transport to one of two fenced and towered tent cities constructed to accommodate a possible evacuation. After about eighteen tense hours, they were transported back. A few days later, ladders were constructed and placed beside housing units to accommodate the possibility of an unexpectedly rapid rise in waters and inadequate time for evacuation. Employees who lived on the grounds had begun sending their families and their possessions to higher ground.

High waters will continue to roll periodically down the Mississippi and its tributaries toward the Gulf of Mexico, and residents all along the river system will cast anxious eyes toward the reinforced walls of earth separating them from the powerful waters roaring past. But the next time that happens at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, employees and inmates alike will breathe a little easier, knowing that the levees surrounding the penitentiary are no longer the weak link in an otherwise strong chain.